

## Baron Robert Stjernstedt: 1941–2012

With the death of Bob Stjernstedt in Lusaka (Zambia) on 26 May 2012, ornithology lost not just another 'African character', but one of the most knowledgeable students of African bird vocalisations. He had been ill for several years, and finally suffered a stroke.

Robert J. Stjernstedt was born in Stockholm (Sweden) on 8 April 1941, but at the age of four his mother took him to Britain. Later, he inherited a Swedish baronetcy on the death of his father. Bob was educated at Bryanston School in Dorset, where he developed a great interest in wildlife through the school's natural history society. Weekend cycling excursions to Poole Harbour and holiday sailing trips to Brittany for birds, together with local badger *Meles meles* watching, nourished his enthusiasm. In 1959 he entered University College, London, where he obtained his B.Sc. in zoology. Clive Mann, two years his junior at UCL, remembers his first meeting, with an untidy man who was clearing up the mess in the zoology laboratory caused by a yoghurt culture that he had left in his locker. They became friends, and in 1962 were members of the university's expedition to the Dahlak Islands in the Eritrean sector of the Red Sea. This adventurously involved visiting 18 islands in a small rowing boat. Their observations on the breeding Sooty Falcons *Falco concolor* and a number of seabirds were published in *Ibis* by Chris Clapham in 1964.

This first experience of Africa convinced Bob that he could live nowhere else, and in 1964 he took up his first post, in Tanzania as a tsetse control biologist. First at Arusha, then Mwanza and Nachingwea (Mtwara), Bob tried to control tsetse flies, and successfully mastered KiSwahili. Increasingly interested in bird vocalisations, recording was to be his main interest for nearly half a century, encouraged by his friend Claude Chappuis. It was at this time that I first corresponded with him, but I did not meet Bob until he moved to Zambia in October 1969. He went on to become Deputy Director of Tsetse Control Services in Lusaka, but was never your typical office 'wallah'.



**Figure 1.** Bob Stjernstedt in the field, 1965 (Clive Mann)

When I first encountered Bob he was living at Mbala, where his domestic situation could only be described as chaotic, a state that was to be the norm until the end. He had little need for luxuries, apart from a drink and his cigarettes (he rolled his own, and Richard Ranft comments that he would find shreds of tobacco with the tape cassettes Bob donated to the British Library of Wildlife Sounds). He had often to earn a living in ways that provided little compensation, other than being able to spend time in the bush. After leaving government service in 1981 he started a commercial fisheries operation on Lake Kariba, and ended up ferrying people, goats and fish in his battered old Land Rover. He had a spell in the Luangwa Valley working as guide for an Italian safari company, and found that conversing with clients was not too difficult if you waved your



arms around and talked of 'hippopotami' and the like. In recent years he led his own tours, 'Birding with Bob'.

Rarely at a loss to identify bird vocalisations, Bob was surprised when I told him the loud and haunting calls we heard at night while camped on the Ufipa Plateau in Tanzania were those of a small mammal, Tree Hyrax *Dendrohyrax arboreus*. Like several people with a good ear for bird calls, Bob was a keen musician, and he and Dylan Aspinwall for a time played clarinets in the Lusaka Orchestra.

There are many stories about Bob's lack of organisation and misfortunes, all of them remembered good-naturedly. There is hardly anyone who knew him in Zambia who has not seen him drive into a river, fall down a cliff, get utterly lost and arrive either very late or (just as often) quite unexpectedly. We remember vividly one such event that attracted the attention of an international assemblage of prestigious ornithologists. It was at the Pan-African Ornithological Congress held in the Seychelles in 1976, where Bob wished to record the rare and little-known Seychelles Scops Owl *Otus insularis*. When recording, he preferred to be alone, so he wandered off one evening to try to tape them. Unfortunately he did not watch his footing and fell down a serious hillside. Turning up later at the five-star hotel (recently inaugurated by the country's President), Bob in torn shorts and covered in blood was disappointed in not being able to enter for the dinner (and not just because he was not wearing a tie). Many birdwatchers in Zambia encountered security problems during the period of apartheid in South Africa and the troubles in Rhodesia, and Bob was more than once subject to the close attention of the police and military. Mike Bingham recounts one of several such incidents, when Bob and some friends were arrested by Zambian soldiers when they stopped for lunch at the roadside. Bob was as usual carrying a tape-recorder and parabolic reflector, and a set of maps of Zambia, as part of his bird atlas surveys. The authorities were so certain they had made a significant capture that they held them prisoners for 12 days, before the intervention of the British High Commission. A variety of 'Bob stories' can be found in *BirdWatch Zambia's* issue for June 2012.



**Figure 2.** Baron Robert Stjernstedt, Zambia, 2010 (Daniel Moyer)

Bob's few publications do little justice to his enormous experience. As co-author he helped clarify the taxonomic status of *Bradypterus* warblers and indigobirds *Vidua* spp., and found the first authentic nest and eggs of the Bar-winged Weaver *Ploceus angolensis*. But a large series of sonograms of scrub-robins *Erythropygia* spp. (made for him by my wife Françoise) got no further than decorating the walls of his living-room. Fortunately we do have his *Sounds of Zambian Wildlife* (2008), a DVD featuring MP3 recordings of 574 Zambian birds, many not available commercially elsewhere. Regrettably the DVD does not include details of recording localities and dates, but some of this information can be traced from a series of cassettes he produced in the 1970s and 1980s.

Bob was a gentleman, courteous, kind and quietly spoken (fortunately his impeccable diction can be heard in his early published cassette recordings). For many years Bob, living at Livingstone, represented Zambian ornithology. He will be greatly missed by all who enjoyed his friendship, and our sympathy goes to his daughter Laura. For help in assembling the memories on which this account is based I thank Laura, and also Pete Leonard and Clive Mann.

*Robert J. Dowsett*